

Houmas search for native language

By [Mary Kilpatrick](#)

Staff Writer

Published: Saturday, August 3, 2013 at 7:08 p.m.

Indistinguishable syllables of the Houma Indian language crackle out over the recording and spell out a long forgotten song of the swamp.

The tape, one of few documentations of the lost Native American language, chants of an alligator hunter duped and chased by his prey.

Two 24-year-old women, members of the United Houma Nation, discovered the cassette in March, hidden away in dusty boxes.



Benjamin Oliver Hicks/Staff

Hali Dardar (left) and Colleen Billiot discuss the best way to teach children a song in the Houma Indian language Thursday at the Courier office in Houma.

Colleen Billiot said when she first heard her great-grandmother hum verses of her heritage, she was hooked.

"This is the language before the European language," she said. "We wanted to connect with our language and our culture."

Billiot, a St. Bernard Parish native with Pointe-aux-Chenes roots, teamed up with Hali Dardar, a New Orleans resident with Lafourche Parish connections, and worked out a plan.

"We would like to get a culture communicating with each other in a Houma language," she said.

The language went extinct in the late 1800s, but corrupted forms, meshed with the French that Cajun settlers brought to the area in the 1700s, still exist around dinner tables, Billiot said. The United Houma Nation has about 17,000 members across southeast Louisiana, most in Terrebonne and Lafourche parishes, and though some still speak Cajun French, many have never heard their native tongue.

Both women said they spent time outside of Louisiana and returned, which fueled their wish to develop a link to their background.

"We went out, and they asked what it meant to be Houma," Billiot said. "We really started to question it ourselves."

The pair launched something called the Houma Language Revitalization Project. The women have spent part of the summer memorizing the words to rhymes they knew or heard, including a children's game called the "Alligator Song," and taught them to kids at Native American camps. Their dream is to create educational materials and a dialogue between younger and older generations.

The twosome have met with Tulane linguists and LSU anthropologists, trying to uncover more about their tribe's oral tradition. And they are seeking to connect with any tribe members who might recall even bits and pieces of the language.

"We're trying to find a dinosaur," Dardar said. "It lived and breathed a thousand years ago, but we know it breathed. We want to dig up the bones and teach it to children. You need to find the grammatical framework. If we can find one small tiny knucklebone, it is a lot better for linguistic research."

Copyright © 2016 HoumaToday.com — All rights reserved. Restricted use only.